

Widening the audience: cultural institutions and the use of virtual communities: two Belgian cases

Stefan Kolgen, New Media Specialist, e-mail: stefan.kolgen@kandl.be, contact address: Kölgen & Laenen bvba: New Media and Arts & Communication, Tabakvest 15 b 6 , B – 2000 Antwerpen, tel: + 32 3 290 48 37, fax. + 32 3 289 31 60, <http://www.kandl.be>

Drs Ann Laenen, Arts Communication Consultant, e-mail: ann.laenen@kandl.be, contact address: Kölgen & Laenen bvba: New Media and Arts & Communication, Tabakvest 15 b 6 , B – 2000 Antwerpen, tel: + 32 3 290 48 37, fax. + 32 3 289 31 60, <http://www.kandl.be>

Abstract: Recent developments in Information Technology have resulted in changes that affected our way of living. These technological innovations have made the Internet more accessible. It is found that more people use the Net nowadays within their work and home environment. Through the Internet people can meet with friends and relatives who live close by and far away. Online social networks or virtual communities continue to develop. In some cases this results in a very 'local' translation of these 'virtual' meetings. 'Socializing' on- and offline becomes important. Cultural Institutions try to find their way through these new communication trends. Policy makes them look for new ways of interaction with their audience. How make people participate into culture by using the New Technologies as an extra tool for debate and action in such a way that it enlarges and extends the activities of the Institution? Through two concrete cases one Youth Theatre called HETPALEIS and a cultural centre, CULTUURCENTRUM BERCHEM, we want to illustrate how the integration of an online forum within the website broadened the interaction between the cultural institution and her audience as well as between the collaborators of the cultural institution itself.

Article: Internet is more present in our everyday life than it was ten years ago. In the early nineties it was an exciting new technology reserved to a small group of users, today it is accessible to everyone and became thus embedded in all levels of society (Wellman, et al. 2003).

We see an enormous increase in use over the last seven years. Through recent technological developments (broader bandwidth, faster and more stable connections, low access costs, wireless access possibilities) the Internet became the ideal information and communication tool for a broad group of the population worldwide.

In this perspective we like to stress that in Belgium the regular use of Internet increased with approximately 0,55 users per 100 inhabitants between April 2001 and April 2002 and reached the level of 3700000 users this year (sources; Belgian Internet Mappings: <http://www.insites.be> and The Networked Readiness Index: <http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cr/profiles.html>). Within these figures all ages and all levels of society are present. The latest Internet Mappings indicate a greater

awareness in the use of the Internet. One out of five users surfs at least one hour a day. Internet has become the way to access firsthand information. The most frequent users are the youngsters age 15 to 24. They surf daily and use the new communication tools such as Chat and MSN Messenger constantly. The group of users that increased the most lately (66%) are to be found in the age range 55+. They are mainly looking for information and news.

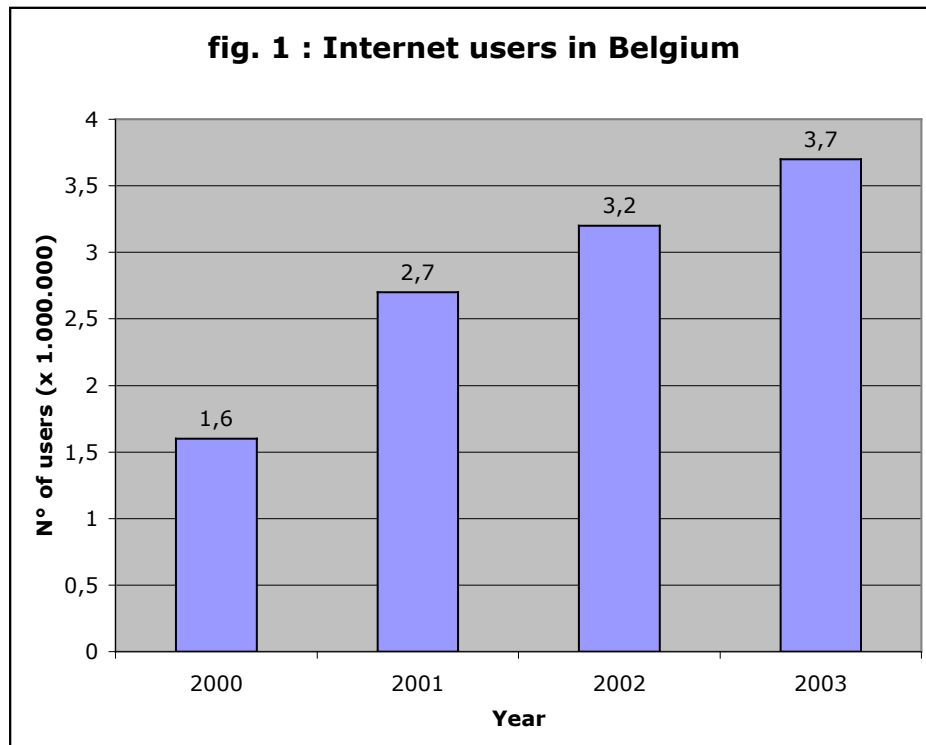


Fig. 1: Number of internet users in Belgium: source Insites

But for all age groups, E-mail, Messaging and Online discussions have become a normal way to communicate with colleagues, friends and relatives close-by and far away. So in a way we might say that it influenced our way of living.

What impact all these technological developments have on society is nowadays food for thought at several research centres worldwide (e.g. the Social Cultural Planning Office in The Hague and the Centre for Urban and Community Studies in Toronto). But our perception of time and space while using these new communication methods has certainly changed.

Time is erased since past, present and future can interact with each other in the same message (Castells 1996:357). John Urry likes to talk about 'global fluids' in which the distance between places and people seem to reduce dramatically. Space becomes 'fluid'. Messages 'find their way' through the Internet in the most unplanned way (2003:2, 63).

The Internet and Virtual Meeting places

‘Internet’ specifically stands for the communication network comprised of millions of interconnected computers worldwide that freely exchange information (2003, Burnett and Marshall: 46).

These computer-mediated communication networks link people, institutions and knowledge. The link with the ‘social’ aspect of Internet is not far to detect: people meeting on-line in a ‘no-place’ environment to share common interests and ideas. This is what Howard Rheingold in 1993 defined as a *Virtual Community*.

In the early days of Internet Culture these ‘Virtual Communities’ were seen as a new kind of social structure, bringing together people with joint affinities, creating ties of support and friendship that might lead to face-to-face interaction. An experience like the WELL, the oldest still ongoing on-line community that emerged in the San Francisco Bay area in the 80ies, seemed to fit the model (<http://www.well.com>). Today, with the Internet more diffused into our everyday life, its effects on sociability became less pronounced (Rheingold 2000, Castells, 2001). Even the WELL underwent considerable changes. As Barry Wellman puts it in his article on *Computer Networks As Social Network* (2001):

‘Computer scientists and developers have come to realize that when computer systems connect people and organizations, they are inherently social. They are also coming to realize that the popular term ‘groupware’ is misleading, because computer networks principally support social networks, not groups.

Networking (online and offline) evolved and moved from a place-to-place to a person-to-person way of domestic and community life (see Wellman et al., 2003). People connect but as individuals. They can switch rapidly from one network or community to another. With the flexibility of today’s communication technology they keep in touch with what interest them at the time of being. This mode of ‘Networked Individualism’ (Castells, 2001) can now be supported in an appropriate way through the Internet. As Manuel Castells points out ‘the on-line social interaction then plays an important role in the social organisation as a whole’ (2001:131). The face-to-face interpersonal communication through the on-line meetings is enlarged here with the interactive computer-assisted interpersonal communication leading into many-to-many or one-to-many impact (Burnett and Marshall, 2003:48). Even one-to-one communication is possible.

Although the positive effects of Internet on Society may be questioned – some critics fear that the more people use Internet, the more they lose contact with their social environment (Nie & Erbring, 2002; Kraut et al., 1998) - recent research shows that computer-mediated communication supports and enriches existing social patterns (De Haan & Huysmans, 2002:80; Wellman 2001; Katz et al., 2001, Kraut et al. 2002).

In this perspective Barry Wellman reports back on a project called NETVILLE. This community project in a suburban neighbourhood of Toronto with access to some of most advanced new technologies available illustrates how these digital technologies strengthened and extended the physical social pattern. The residents connected were better informed and more up to date with what was going on in the community. They also visited each other more often than those that weren’t part of the digital Network (2002b, see also Hampton, 2001).

Recent developments in wireless communication also seem to support this new way of networking. It isn't just an easy way to access the Internet, it's also a way of life and a new way of socializing. Worldwide youngsters use MMS and SMS to transfer messages to one another and to try and meet up somewhere (Rheingold, 2002). This virtual way of communicating underpins their social life.

In his article *Surfing as free as a cloud* Sean Dodson points out that by getting wireless we are confronted with our physical environment again. The implant of 'wireless' hotspots brings us back to our neighbourhoods. The strengthening of the 'local' aspect within the 'global' issue of society becomes more of a reality with today's technological trends (Dodson, 2002).

New technologies, interaction and cultural institutions

The awareness of these evolvments in social networking and communicating made certain cultural institutions in Belgium wonder how they could try to keep up with these trends by using these new technologies. Local and national policymakers opened the debate on 'cultural participation'. The authorities asked the cultural houses to open up their institutions to a wider audience, as many citizens as possible should participate and benefit from culture. Participating means 'interact in' as well as 'assist to' a cultural activity (Anciaux, Beleidsnota 2000-2004). This interaction can be 'virtual' or 'real'. So looking at the latest developments in ICT and technology, which way is there to go to get new ways of interaction with today's audience keeping in mind that there is a big challenge in using the possibilities New Technologies are offering? What role is there to play for ICT and New Technologies in the frame of 'cultural participation? Could they be used to facilitate and enlarge 'public' participation in cultural activities, and if so how could they then become 'extra tools' for debate and action, in such a way that they extend the activities of the cultural houses? How could these technologies help the Institution to link in with the social pattern of the city that surrounds it? And how do you balance the 'virtual' and the 'real' aspect?

In the frame of this discussion two cultural institutions in Antwerp decided they wanted to confront the discussion with their audience in a 'public and open' sphere by using the new communication trends. They want 'interaction' and 'debate' not only with the audience that usually visits the auditorium, but also with those that wouldn't normally come but might be interested in their activities. In order to make this work, these cultural institutions started to work recently with a 'virtual meeting space' or forum integrated within their websites. Both the cultural centre in Berchem (a suburb from Antwerp) and the youth theatre HETPALEIS wanted to initiate the debate with their audience through the use of the Internet.

The forum they implemented to 'inter'-act online, is a tool with a chat-module, a discussion format and a data storage system. There is room for real-time and asynchronous discussion, the exchange of ideas, the organisation of polls, and document storage of ongoing and new projects. Since the platform can be accessed through Internet the user can log on wherever he is.

First of all, the 'virtual platform' it's designed to be a 'meeting place' for the visitors

(on-and off-line) of the cultural house. There is room for interaction, debate and discussion between the cultural institution and its audience but also between the visitors themselves, so that the platform can become an 'extra' space parallel to the auditorium where 'virtual' visitors may add their contribution to the life 'in' the auditorium.

Since it is a challenge for the Institution to know who their audience is and to service this audience in the utmost way, the data gathered by the forum through the registration of the users is precious material to develop a more one-to-one based communication towards that audience in the future. Newsletters and Newsflashes specifically designed to their profile can be sent to them from within the forum.

This individual approach shows also in the fact that different interest groups can be identified within the forum. So a part from the main 'meeting space, user groups with a specific profile such as 'journalists' and 'teachers' can have their own space on the platform where they can find information and documentation about the activities and where they can interact with each other on the presented topics.

A part from these external connections the forum perfectly interlinks with the other layers of communication within the Institution. It functions as an intranet within the houses between colleagues as well as an Xtranet with project partners and possible co-producers.

The forum becomes thus a 'community of people linked professionally or by interest to the cultural house that runs it.

A 'virtual forum' within the cultural institution: 2 Cases

1.CULTUURCENTRUM BERCHEM

At the time of writing the 'virtual meeting space' of the CULTUURCENTRUM BERCHEM is still in its trial phase, but we wanted to mention it in this paper because of it's specific character in the frame of the cultural centre. The centre has very divers activities: theatre performances, dance, music, festivals and workshops on a wide range of topics. There aim is to be an 'open house'. A meeting place for the neighbours, the performing art lovers and artists. The centre acknowledges in this interaction with the neighbourhood the value of the city as a place for 'virtual' and 'physical' social networks with room for artistic experiments and 'multi' – 'inter' cultural exchanges (<http://www.ccbe.be/>).

Within this philosophy the forum can play a crucial role in the future. It could become an **extra** link between the activities in CULTUURCENTRUM BERCHEM and its neighbourhood. The centre is based in a multi-cultural and socially divers suburb of Antwerp. It acts as a cultural motor in that part of the city. Some of its neighbours never had the chance to access the Internet. Today the cultural centre tries to alter this. A 'virtual community' with a 'real translation' zooming in on the diversity of its visitors is quiet likely to happen.

Next season the forum will already be seen as an extension of the centre. The 'virtual meeting place' will be as much a meeting place open to the organisations that

surround the centre as the ‘real’ auditoriums that are used by these groups today. So slowly the ‘virtual link’ will integrate into the social pattern of BERCHEM. It would be interesting to see in a year’s time what the impact of the forum had in this perspective.

2. HETPALEISforum

The HETPALEIS forum functions in a totally different context. This youth theatre in the hart of Antwerp was looking for ways to open the house to a wider audience. They also wanted to start an ongoing debate with their existing audience. Since HETPALEIS has a young audience, they where keen to know how youngsters meet, socialize and communicate nowadays. Recent mappings showed that 40% of the Belgian Youngster aged 15 to 17 surf the seven days a week. This age group is also keen on using the hottest communication tools such as (<http://www.insites.be>) Instant Messaging, Chat, SMS, MMS and Blogging. So it was a challenge to open the debate with this group through a medium they are more than acquainted with, the Internet. So a ‘virtual meeting place’ integrated in the website was put online. HETPALEIS started with the forum in January 2003 after a trial period of 3 weeks (<http://forum.hetpaleis.be/>) giving the opportunity to their audience and to people from HETPALEIS to meet asynchronous or in real time through regularly scheduled chatsessions with artists and cultural key persons. Everyone can enter the forum. After a simple registration procedure, you can choose your avatar and you are a member of the virtual HETPALEIS.

It seems to have been a good way to go because during the last six months the number of registered forum users increased spectacularly. The forum has become thé place to be for collaborators, co-producers, partners, journalist, theatregoers and computer geeks interested in theatre to exchange ideas, discuss HETPALEIS-activities and have ongoing debates and reflections on a broader cultural level.

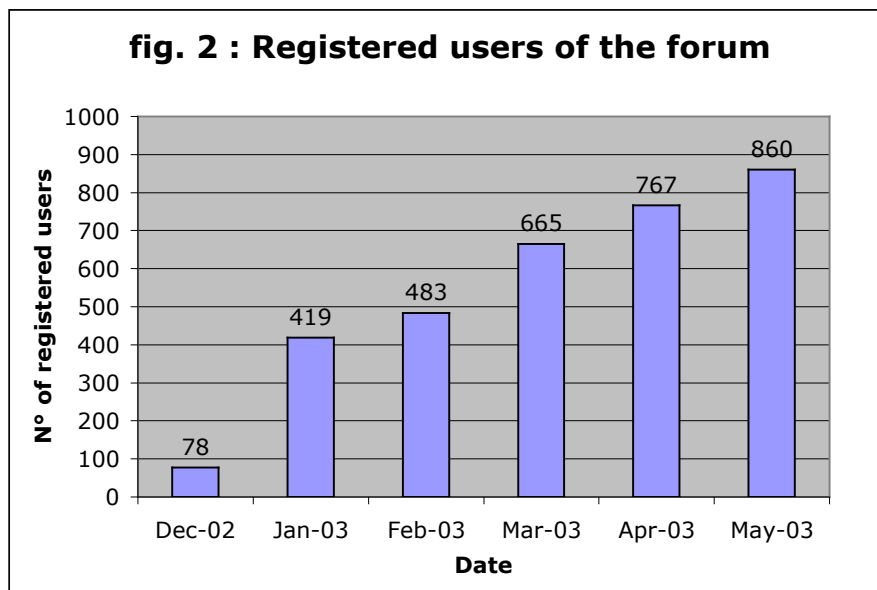


Fig. 2: Number of registered users of HETPALEIS forum. Source K & L.

80% of the users are visitors interested in theatre, 20% are subgroups such as

journalist, collaborators of HETPALEIS and Xtranets for co-organisers and partners of the house.

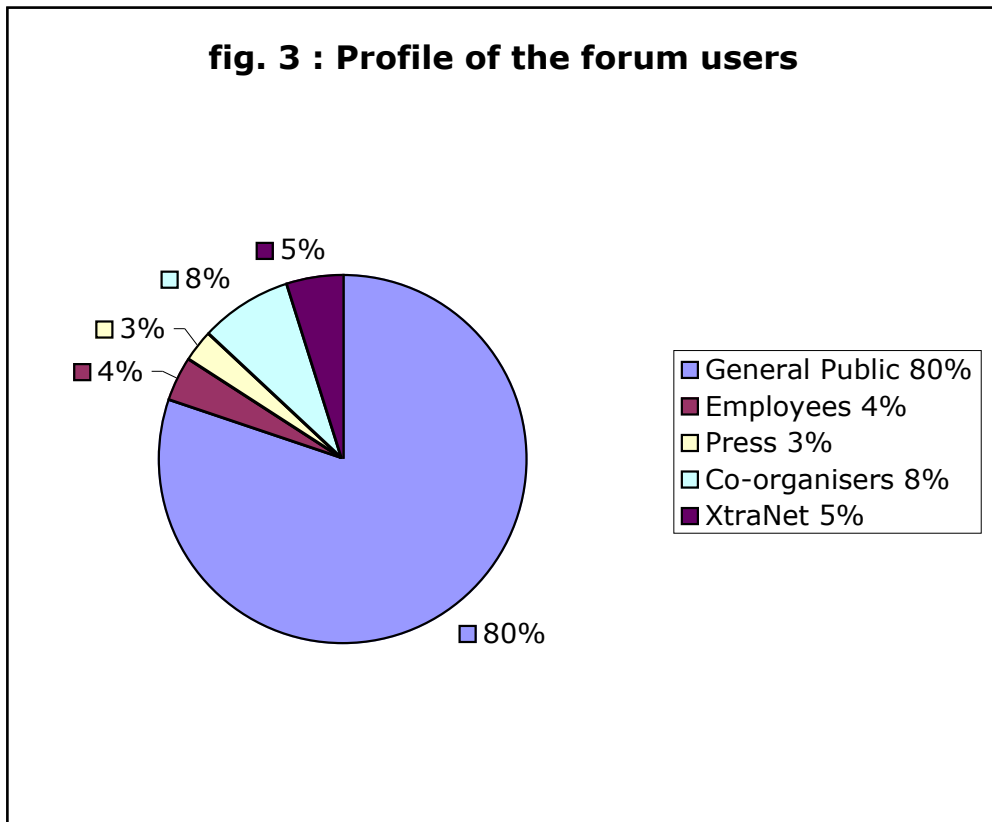


Fig 3: Profile of the forum users. Source: HETPALEIS.

Four mayor strands define the structure of the forum:

- There is a place for reactions on the activities of HETPALEIS
- A FAQ
- A chat box for the scheduled chatsessions and a storage room for the recorded chats
- And a place for 'suggestions' from the visitors for the forum or for future activities in HETPALEIS

These strands and especially the 'suggestions' – part should help to transform the forum into a place with its own character, answering the demands of the users as good and as bad as possible.

Suggestions posted by the current visitors already give an idea of the way the forum might develop in the future; a creative and interactive place where it is fun to be for the theatre freak as well as for the Internet geek. In such a way the forum not only becomes **the** virtual link with what happens in the auditorium, but also becomes a **new** link with the HETPALEIS - activities and projects.

The users suggested for instance to implement Weblogs in the future. These online diary-systems open more than one way of creative interaction. A part from weblogs on the work of artists active in HETPALEIS , the tool could also be used to publish

unpublished theatre texts or to create a theatre text on-line with several forum visitors. The latter can then linked back from the 'virtual' world of the forum to the 'real' world of the theatre when programming and producing these texts on stage.

The balance between the 'virtual platform' and the 'real auditorium' is a very delicate and very important one. The forum is situated right on the edge. It is 'virtual' because of its online character, its interlinked with the 'real' life of the theatre and its neighbourhood as a communication tool between collaborators, journalist, co-organisers and producers. There where the link between 'virtual' and 'real' is still in its first evolutions when talking about creative interaction with the visitors of HETPALEIS, it is already very well developed in terms of communication and marketing.

The virtual platform is part of the communication mix. It balances with the information on the website and with the newflash that is regularly send to its subscribers. These three communication strands interlinked with each another and will become one in the future. Thus the forum cannot be seen a part from the other online communication tools HETPALEIS uses.

In terms of the debate on 'cultural participation' HETPALEIS wanted to know after three months of forum activity HETPALEIS whether the forum and the other online activities met the expectations of the users, whether they reached the right age group and whether they also reached a new audience.

So HETPALEIS organised a survey not only on the impact of the forum, but also on the impact of the HETPALEIS Newsflash and website. The survey went online between 15 April and 30 May. 464 useful answers were retrieved from the forum users, the newsflash subscribers and the web visitors. The results of the survey were analysed in the frame of a visitor survey held at HETPALEIS during the season 2000-2001, an observation of the use of the forum and the figures of the Belgian Internet Mapping.

Do the online activities meet the expectations of the visitors?

The respondents are positive to very positive about the online activities of HETPALEIS. Website, forum and newsflash seem already to meet the expectations of the users. The interactive part needs time to evolve. Forum activities only started recently compared to the other online activities of HETPALEIS so it is too early yet to draw definite conclusions but we might say that the tool did start a discussion between HETPALEIS and the audience as well as between the audience itself.

Forum users sometimes pushed one another to go and see a performance at HETPALEIS and we can see a group of loyal forum users growing taking part in all forum activities.

If we take a closer look to the way the forum is used today, we notice that the 'comments' area is the most popular part of the virtual platform. The forum users are very concerned about the development of this online tool: 48% of them left a suggestion or went into discussion with other virtual visitors and collaborators of

HETPALEIS. The level of the comments and the discussions sometimes reached a broader cultural and social level.

The same trends can be found in the content of the chat sessions. Those real-time discussions with artists, actors and other cultural key figures are much appreciated and show a difference in profile of the chatters according to the guests invited to the session. Thus the forum is accessed by a wide variety of theatre geeks with an interesting view on society.

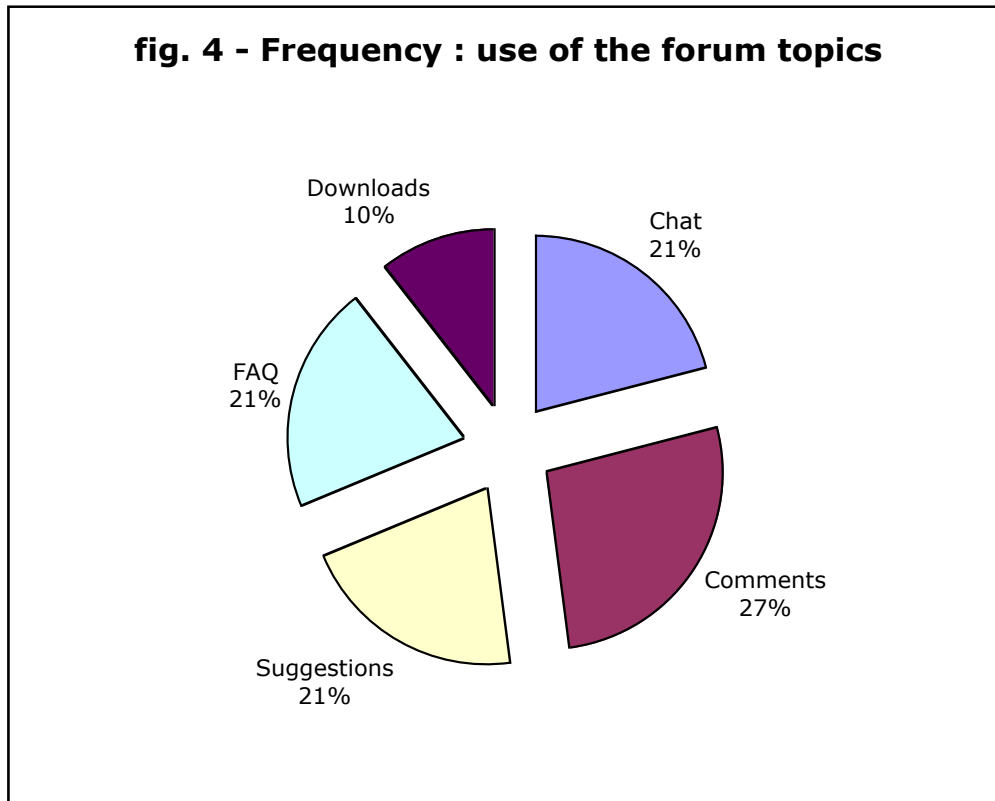


Fig. 4: Frequency – use of topics on the forum. Source: online survey 2003, K & L.

Do we reach the right age group with our online activities?

The largest group of respondents are between 14 and 55 years of age. Only 2 of them are younger than 10 and 9 are between 10 and 13. 5 respondents were over 55.

We compared the results of the survey with the results of a visitors survey ran at HETPALEIS during the season 200-2001 to see whether the profiles of the visitors on the web and the visitors of a performance matched. The comparison showed us that HETPALEIS indeed reaches its target audience with its online communication. The age group 14 to 24 represents 64% of those questioned. 75% of them are female, which is remarkable because the profile of the average Belgian Internet user is young and male (see Belgian Internet Mapping <http://www.insites.be/>) . It does match though the profile of the average attendee of a theatre performance at HETPALEIS: young and female. This links in with the general tendency that young Belgian female

prefer to participate more in cultural rather than in other leisure possibilities (De Groof, S and W. Smits, 2002:114).

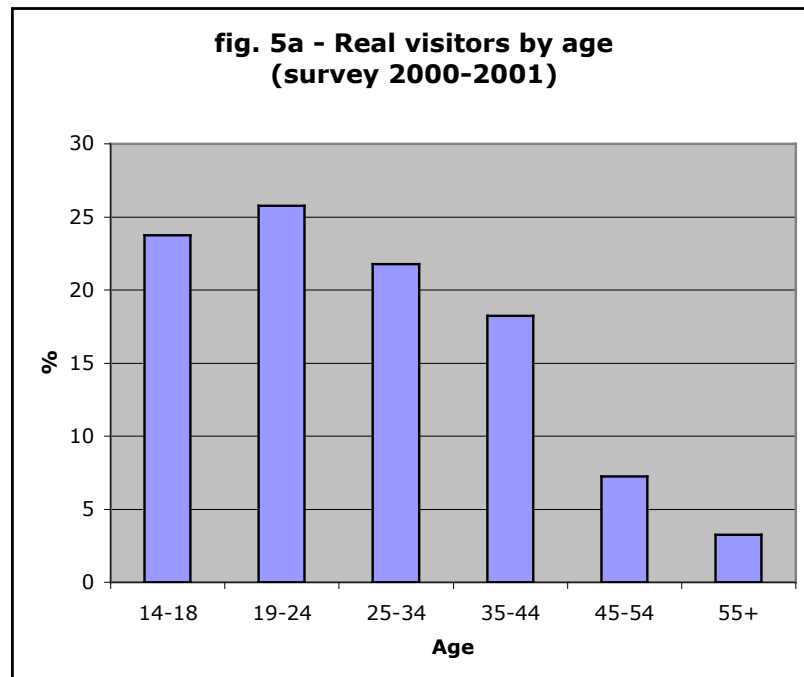


Fig 5 a: Age groups visitors of performances. Source: visitor survey 2000-200 HETPALEIS.

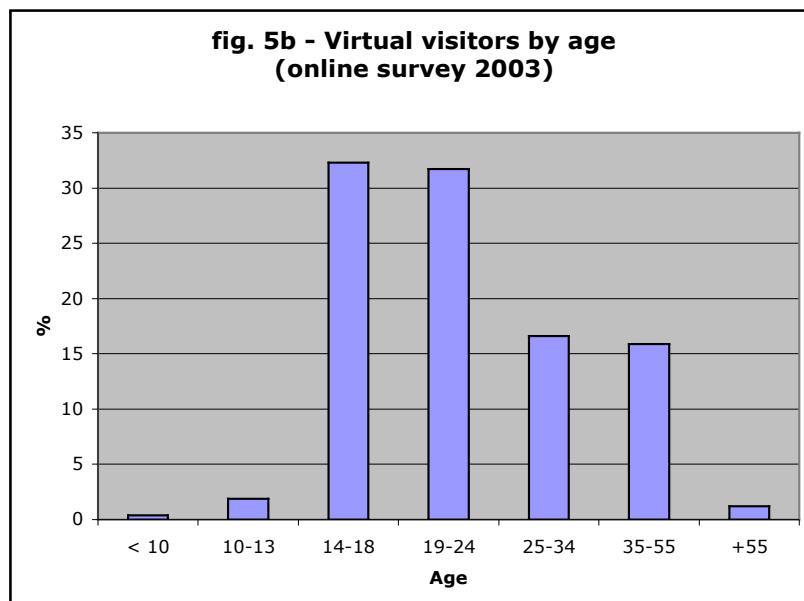


Fig 5 b: Age groups virtual visitors HETPALEIS. Source: online survey 2003, K & L.

In the age range 25 to 55, which is 32,5% of those questioned, we see the same tendency. Most of them are female and parent. Again this matches with the results of the visitors' study of 2000-2001 where in the category 25 – 44 mostly female parents were identified. Within the family most of the time it seems to be the mothers buying the tickets to go to the theatre with their children.

Do we reach a new audience with our online activities?

87 % of the respondents to the online survey once visited a performance of HETPALEIS. 33,8 % of them went at least once per season, 36, 6% more then once. 12% never set foot in a performance of HETPALEIS up to know, mainly because of lack of time or because of the distance. (most respondents live in Antwerp, some around Ghent and Bruges). This is the group visits the website, receives the newsflash or is registered as a user on the forum, but never had the chance to come to the auditorium.

Some of the 12% non-attendees expressed the wish to go at least once to a HETPALEIS performance one day, but they do access the online HETPALEIS facilities often. 31% of them visit at least once a month HETPALEIS online, 65% surf to HETPALEIS frequently during the season. These people mainly visit the virtual HETPALEIS to look for information and news. So they definitely want to stay in tune with what happens in and around HETPALEIS. There is an opportunity here according to the role the website with the forum could play in the future.

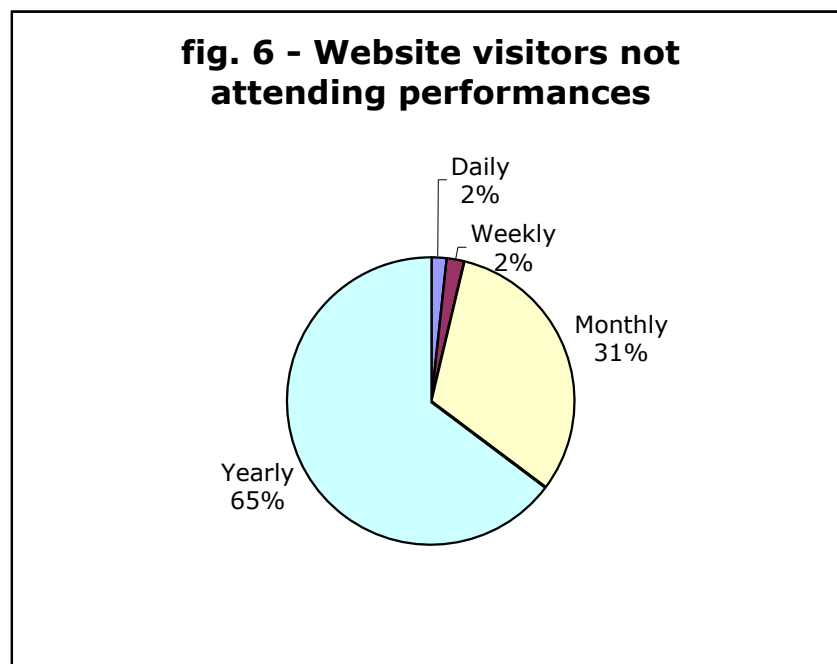


Fig. 6: Website visitors not attending performances several times a day, several times a week, several times a month, several times a year. Source: online survey 2003, K & L.

Food for thought

If we link back we should point out that the success of online activities within a cultural institution is due to the fact that these activities are implemented in the overall communication strategy of the house.

‘On-line meeting places’ such as CULTUURCENTRUM BERCHEM and HETPALEIS launched not only ask for an enormous engagement of all collaborators

of the house, it is also a very important statement of these institutions to society. A lot of courage is needed to dare to confront oneself in an 'open' and 'interactive' discussion with its audience.

To find the appropriate tools to enable this 'open' and 'interactive' debate is crucial. The use of New Technologies in this behalf is a challenge. Question is how and to what extent the institution should follow these trends?

Time travels fast: what's hot today might be 'old news' tomorrow. Balancing the needs of the audience with the possibilities these technologies offer is the message to take into account. It is a process of constant evaluation and adaptation to make things work.

Acknowledgments

This article wouldn't have been possible without the trust and the help of HETPALEIS, Bert Van Laere (student cultuurmanagement – University Antwerp) and CULTUURCENTRUM BERCHEM to develop these two on-online cases.

References

Anciaux, B (2000). Beleidsnota Cultuur 2000-2004, Brussel, Vlaamse Gemeenschap.

Burnett, R and P.D. Marchall (2003). Web Theory: an introduction. London and New York, Routledge.

Castells, M. (2001). The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

De Groof, S. en W. Smits (2002) "Solitaire of tikkerke kus? Overformele participatie bij jongeren" in Elchardus, M & I. Glorieux, De Symbolische Samenleving, Lanno, Tielt : 109-126.

De Haan, J. and F. Huysmans (2002). "Differences in Time Use between Internet Users and Nonusers in The Netherlands." IT & Society 1(2): 67-85.

Dodson, S. (2002). " Surfing as free as a cloud." The Guardian.

Donath, J. S. (1996). Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community: final draft MIT Lab. Communities in Cyberspace. M. Smith and P. Kollock. London, Routledge.

Gauntlett, D. ed. (2000) Web.Studies: Rewiring media studies for the digital age. London, Arnold Publishers.

Hampton, K.N (2001). Living the wired life in the wired suburb: Netville, Glocalization and Civil Society. thesis ,University of Toronto.

HETPALEIS publieksonderzoek seizoen 2000-2001, HETPALEIS, Antwerpen

Katz, J. E., R. E. Rice, et al. (2001). "The Internet, 1995-2000: Access, Civic Involvement, and Social Interaction." American Behavioral Scientist **45**(3): 404-419.

Kirkman, G., J. Sachs, et al., Eds. (2002). The Global Information Technology Report 2001-2002: Readiness for the Networked World. Cary-USA, Oxford University Press.

Kraut, R. et al (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduce social involvement and psychological well-being? American Psychologist . 53 (9):1011-1031.

Kraut, R. et al. (2002). Internet paradox revisited. Journal of Social Issues, 58(1): 49-74.

Nie, N. H. and L. Erbring (2002). "Internet and Society: A Preliminary Report." IT & Society **1**(1): 275-283.

Rheingold, H. (2000). The virtual community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier: revised edition of 1993. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press.

Rheingold, H. (2002) Smartmobs, Reading, M.A.: Perseus Books.

Rice, R. E. (1987). "Computer-mediated communication and organizational innovation." Journal of Communication **37**(4): 65-94.

Smith, M. and P. Kollock, Eds. (1998). Communities in Cyberspace. London and New York, Routledge.

Stevenson, N. (2002). Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication. London, Sage.

Tuomi, I. (2001). "From Periphery to Center: Emerging Research Topics on Knowledge Society." Technology Review **116**:2001.

Urry, J. (2003). Global Complexity. Cambridge, UK, Polity.

Van Wel, H. (2002). De I-Dialog: Inspiratieboek over het DNA van verandering en communicatie. Amsterdam, Pearsons Education Uitgeverij BV.

Wellman, B. and M. Gulia (1999). Netsurfers don't ride alone: virtual communities as communities. Networks in the Global Village. B. Wellman. Boulder, CO, Westview Press: 331-66.

Wellman, B. (2001a). "Computer Networks As Social Networks." Science **293**: 2031-2034.

Wellman, B. (2001b). "Physical place and CyberPlace: The Rise of Personalized Networking." International Journal of Urban and Regional Research **25**(1. special issue on 'Networks, Class and Place').

Wellman, B. A. Quan –Haase, J. Boase, W. Chen (2002a) Examining the Internet in Everyday Life. Keynote to the Euricom Conference on e-Democracy, Nijmegen, Netherlands, October 2002.

Wellman, B and C. Haythornthwaite; ed. (2002b) The Internet in Everyday Life, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

Wellman, B et al. (2003) “The social affordance of the Internet for Networked Individualism”. JCMC 8 (3) April 2003.

Internet references

Belgian Internet Mappings: <http://www.insites.be>

The Networked Readiness Index: <http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cr/>

The WELL: <http://www.well.com>

HETPALEIS Forum: <http://forum.hetpaleis.be>

<http://forum.ccbe.be> and <http://www.ccbe.be>

The Digital City Amsterdam: <http://examen.martijnvanes.net/dds/ddsmain.htm>

Published in:

Proceedings COST conference 2003:

The Good, The Bad and The Irrelevant: The user and the future of information and communication technologies, COST action 269 and
The Media Lab of University of Art and Design Helsinki UIAH
3-5 september 2003, pp. 241-245.